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Research Request Received: East Timor - Notes on the humanitarian situation

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East Timor - Notes on the humanitarian situation

Although there continues to be a lack of detailed information on the situation in East Timor, a steady flow of reports from diverse sources - Indonesian as well as non-Indonesian - offers further evidence that the Timorese people have suffered terribly as a direct or indirect result of Indonesia's intervention, and that many thousands continue to be at risk. Indeed, according to a well-informed source, large sections of the population are in such a desperate plight, that, in spite of the fact that armed resistance to Indonesian forces no longer presents a serious impediment to relief operations, a further 20-40,000 Timorese will die, even with new relief coming from the recently-announced joint International Red Cross/ Indonesian Red Cross mission. Information from a variety of sources (and none of them linked with Fretilin) supports the view that, although the military resistance might well be almost over, the vast majority of the Timorese people, including most of those who were initially not averse to the idea of "integration", would favour an alternative to Indonesian rule if the options were presented to them.

In the unfolding of the grim human dramas in Indochina, reports on the situation in East Timor have barely rated a passing interest. While it is clear that the humanitarian consequences of Indonesia's "integration" of the former Portuguese province might seem comparatively small in absolute terms, in relative terms the dimensions of the Timor tragedy, based on a wide range of experienced, well-informed and impartial sources, appear difficult to surpass. Indeed, one particularly disturbing aspect of the Timor situation is the persistant refusal of those countries that normally champion human rights to examine, let alone accept, the steady flow of evidence that a tragedy of far greater proportions that was at first believed has been endured by the inhabitants of an island only 350 miles from Australia. Thus no single nation has sought to bring any significant pressure to bear on Indonesia, the power largely responsible for what must be one of the most flagrant denials of human rights in the history of modern decolonization.

It is true that, in a recent statement by Mr. Peacock announcing a further $200,000 of aid for East Timor, the Government acknowledged its recognition of the "genuine humanitarian problem which exists in East Timor". But it seems that the present level of relief, not to speak of the low level of interest in the human rights situation, does not match the magnitude of the problem. The attention the world has given to the Timor problem stands in conspicuous contrast to the interest evoked by the humanitarian situation in Indochina, which deservedly has become a focus of international concern, of all kinds of assistance, and of diplomatic activity by a large number of countries, both Western and Third World. In recent times abuses of human rights in relatively distant Uganda, Eritrea and the Central African Empire have been more extensively reported and responded to in the Australian press than reports at least as credible, that have come out of East Timor. Perhaps the most disturbing dimension of the Timor tragedy is that none of those countries who are in a position to exert some influence on Indonesia, has shown other than a sceptical and passive interest in reports of this disturbing contravention of human rights.

During the past 12 months press reports about East Timor have been few, but a number of interesting and credible accounts from private sources have been studied in the preparation of this paper. Most informants have sought assurances that their identities not be disclosed, reflecting their fears of possible reprisals involving relatives or the Timorese community in general. In the circumstances, it is not possible in a paper of this kind to document sources other than in a general way. From the continuing reports of maltreatment of the Timorese population by Indonesian authorities and the obstruction of the family reunion programme, the fears expressed by the Timorese appear to be justified. It is clear that a comprehensive and more widely acceptable account of what has happened in East Timor during the past three and a half years cannot be completed without the constituting of an enquiry of some kind with facilities to research and process the information available, as well as means to safeeguard the identities of those prepared to supply it.

Reports from Indonesian sources and foreign visitors

Of course not all reports about East Timor are critical of Indonesia's role and behaviour in the "integration" process. Indonesian officials and the Jakarta press consistently report that resistance to integration no longer exists and that the Timorese are now concentrating on the tasks of reconstruction and development. Earlier this year East Timor was visited by a group of provincial governors, at least some of whom were obviously taken aback by Timor's desperate need for development assistance in one form or another, and some donations from provincial budgets were subsequently made. In March this year the annual meeting of military commanders (the Commander's Call) was held at Dili (the first time this meeting has been held outside Java) and the press dutifully reported favourably on conditions in the former Portuguese colony.

It is evident that the Indonesian authorities have launched a number of development projects, although some of them seem to be more related to military and security needs than to the immediate needs of the people. One area of emphasis is the teaching of Indonesian. According to a recent article in "Kompas", there are now about nearly 200 Indonesian teachers in East Timor whose main task is to spread the knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia as quickly as possible. Extensive road repair and construction is also reportedly being carried out, mainly by Zikon (construction engineer) troops. But some of the projects, such as the traffic lights for Dili and consignments of colour television sets from Pertamina, seem designed more to serve the needs of the Indonesians than the basic survival requirements of the Timorese. There is no reason to doubt, as some travellers report, that at least on the surface, life appears to be returning to normal in the main towns. On the other hand, only some 5% of the population is to be found in the main towns of East Timor. Most of the few foreign visitors to Dili seem to have been unduly influenced by the relative calm of the capital which, in some cases, seems to have distorted assessments of the overall situation, perhaps reflecting an ignorance of what Timor was like before the Indonesians invaded the territory and of the

true course of events during the past 4 years. It seems that the few visitors to the territory have had only fleeting and controlled contact with the fringe of the Timorese population most of whom are now reportedly located in a number of displaced persons camps, some of which were initially based on the "strategic hamlets" set up by the Americans in Vietnam. Thus there has been a tendency among the few foreign visitors to Dili to accept the Indonesian explanation that the "displaced persons" are Timorese who ran into the mountains with Fretilin where they were held against their will, and that they subsequently responded to President Suharto's offer of an amnesty and reported to receiving centres for registration and relief. It is often overlooked that it was the harsh treatment of the population by the invading forces, plus opposition to "integration", that prompted many of the Timorese to seek refuge in the mountains in the first place. From an analysis of numerous reports from East Timor over the past 3 years it seems beyond doubt that most of the deaths since December 1975, and the present poor physical condition of the Timorese, are the grim consequences of the deliberate Indonesian strategy designed to starve Fretilin and its supporters into surrender. As one of the more perceptive observers put it; "The Indonesians tried to starve Fretelin into submission, and in the process succeeded in starving tens of thousands of Timorese to death".

Reports from non-Indonesian sources

Nearly all of the many reports from non-Indonesian sources paint a grim picture of the humanitarian situation in the territory. They differ substantially from the reports of such sources as the representative of the New Zealand Red Cross and, for that matter, the occasional comments that come from Australian officials, but, in the writer's opinion, most of the latter observations less accurately and frankly reflect the real situation in East Timor. In fairness to officials, given the present sensitive character of Australian-Indonesian relations, observations critical of Indonesia's performance in the territory would present obvious difficulties. One of the most interesting and intriguing accounts is a report which was compiled by

Indonesian Church officials who spent some time in Timor in the early part of this year. We have also received a detailed interview of Father de Rego, a Portuguese priest, who was repatriated to Portugal in July this year, after having spent the past 4 years or so in mountain areas. Information has also come from many Timorese sources, none of whom are members of the Fretilin movement. Unfortunately, for reasons mentioned earlier in this paper, their identities cannot be divulged in a paper of this kind. Some of the sources, on which this account of the situation is based, among them the Indonesian Church officials and the Portuguese priest, are experienced, well-informed, and politically impartial observers, whose observations are of great value. The Portuguese priest and some other Timorese sources would, I believe, be prepared to make themselves available for further questioning.

The report from Indonesian Church sources is the first document to contain demographic information on the effect of the fighting on East Timor's population. It notes that the population of 688,771, which was recorded by the Diocese of Dili in 1974 had declined to 329,271 at the end of 1978, based on an assessment completed at that time by the Indonesian Defence and Security Authorities responsible for East Timor. This assessment shows a slight increase in the number of Roman Catholics and Protestants - for Catholics an increase from 220,314 in 1974 to 255,417 at the end of 1978, and for Protestants an increase from 2,550 to 4,354 during the same period. The population count of animists, on the other hand, indicates a drastic decline - from 460,112 in 1974 to 68,839 at the end of 1978. At first glance it is tempting to conclude that an increase in the number of Christians could not be reconciled with such a drastic fall in the total population of the territory. However, this change in the pattern of religious adherence is in fact consistent with reports from Church sources that the horrors of the past three and a half years led to tens of thousands of Timorese turning to the Church for salvation. A similar upsurge in baptisms occured during the Japanese occupation, and during other upheavals in the past two centuries. Under the Portuguese, the Church constituted a kind of buffer between the colonial administration and the

ordinary people, to whom it offered some sanctuary in times of crisis.

A further explanation of this catastrophic decline in animist population since 1974 is the fact that this group, who make up the more primitive inhabitants of Timor, most of them residing in small mountain hamlets, suffered heavily from the Indonesian military operations, particularly the bombing raids to which their tinder-dry palapa and bamboo houses were so vulnerable. But the major cause of death was starvation and disease, because this element of East Timor's population, as in the case of adjacent Indonesian communities, suffers from endemic malnutrition. These people form the majority of the victims of Indonesia's policy of isolating the Timorese (who were without doctors and had few medicines) and starving them into submission. Finally, thousands were to die of starvation and disease in the "strategic hamlets" where the Indonesian authorities failed to provide adequate food supplies and urgently needed medical treatment. It might well be that the Indonesian military authorities have underestimated the Timorese population in areas where Fretilin remnants are still active, but, in view of the small size of the country, such an oversight could not be expected to exceed 50,000 people.

The authors of this report are not the only ones to refer to a sharp decline in East Timor's population. A sensitively- placed Indonesian official spoke frankly about the Timor affair to U.N. officials in December last year and confided that the military authorities had spoken of a population assessment of "about 400,000 Timorese". The Portuguese priest, Father de Rego, has made some interesting comments on this subject. The priest stated that about one-third of the population perished in the Laclubar/Turiscai district in which he spent most of the past three years.

The Indonesian authorities themselves have made few comments on the loss of life in East Timor. One rather facile comment was made in an interview reported in The Sydney Morning Herald on 10 September. In this article Jusuf Wanandi (a member

of Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies) claimed that only between 10 and 15 thousand Timorese had died over the past four years. The stated basis for his reckoning was that a recent Indonesian census had revealed that the Territory's population was 15,000 less than the figure of 650,000 in 1974 according to the Portuguese census of that year (in fact no Portuguese census was taken at that time). The journalists who conducted the interview did not take up Wanandi on his crude arithmetic, but, even if these figures had been correct, the Indonesians had overlooked the fact that the population, following the demographic pattern, would have grown at the rate of about 1.8%, leaving another 50,000 people unaccounted for!

The report from Church sources recorded some examples of population decline. It noted, for example, that the former mountain tourist centre of Maubisse had recorded a population of 9,607 in 1976, but by 1979 the figure had declined to 4,586. But perhaps of greater relevance to the present paper are the report's comments on the continuing, in some places accelerating, high death rate. For example, it noted that the head of one district reported that 164 of his people died during 1978, but 120 had died between January and mid-March in 1979. The report concluded that "an increasing death toll seems to be a general phenomenon all over the villages in East Timor".

In a reference to the once prosperous coffee district of Ermera, the report states; "in Ermera, the densely populated capital of a coffee producing district where the 'refugees' coming back from the mountains were held, the death toll was so high that the people started to use the expression: 'the more refugees, the more corpses'". It noted that 300 Timorese were said to die each month at this particular refugee camp. The continuing high death rate in the mountains is a subject of almost every report coming out of Timor. A recent report from an aid source stated that in ten or so centres some 75,000 people were in desperate straits. The aid official observed that 20,000 of the inmates were in a hopeless condition and would die, even if assistance came at once. Of the remainder, most would perish unless assistance was received as a matter of urgency.

The Indonesian Church Report and reports from other Church officials in East Timor make it clear that the various Indonesian authorities concerned with relief, including the Indonesian Red Cross, have failed to provided relief appropriate to the magnitude of the humanitarian situation in East Timor. In the first place, it is clear that the death toll continues to be extremely high, in spite of the fact that in most areas relief operations are no longer hampered by war conditions or insecurity. The Church Report noted that in spite of the Government subsidy of $US5 million and the availability of supplies in Dili, the "Indonesian Red Cross is unable to carry out an efficient program. Lack of transportation is the big bottle-neck. Unfortunately supplies stored in the godown of Dili promote manipulation, black market and the like. Medicines are sold in the shops for prices only very few can afford to pay". The Report mentioned, as an example, the medical centre at a major refugee camp near Maubisse, which was almost without supplies, its main items being "300 pills of chloroquine tablets and 5 metres of band aid". It was also reported that in March 1979 some 6,000 people in the same area waited for food for some five weeks and then received only five tonnes of corn. The report declared that; "providing aid in small quantities and with long delays impresses as an irony. No wonder that people started complaining that the Indonesian authorities want them to die off by hunger and disease". The same story of maladministration and corruption in the distribution of aid comes from many other sources, among them letters from East Timor and from others who have managed to leave the territory. The former Bishop of Timor, Bishop Ribeiro, who is now in Portugal, was in the past often critical of the humanitarian relief arrangements organised by the Indonesian occupying authorities. But efforts to arrange for relief supplies to be channelled through the more efficient Church oganizations have met with opposition from the Indonesian military who are apparently anxious that this assistance should be identified as originating from Indonesian rather than Church sources.

A Report published by the Australian Council for Overseas Aid in July this year, also drew attention to the

complete inadequacy of the basic relief arrangements for the vast number of displaced persons in East Timor. Some of the material on which the ACFOA Report is based has also been referred to in the preparation of this paper, but almost all reports from non-Indonesian sources contain similar criticisms. Nearly all of these reports reinforce the conclusion that Indonesia's forced integration of East Timor has been devastating in terms of loss of life and other forms of human suffering, and that the Indonesian authorities, including the Indonesian Red Cross, have not been able to cope with its devastating humanitarian consequences.

The comments of Father de Rego who left Timor in June this year, provide a unique insight into the situation behind Fretilin lines in the three years after the Indonesian invasion. He said that hunger first became serious towards the end of 1977, when the Indonesian armed forces intensified their operations against Fretilin. He reported that the Indonesian "search and destroy" operations forced the Timorese to flee from one area to another and thus food production behind Fretelin lines virtually came to an end. The Indonesian military authorities then began to force the Timorese into the centres based on the American "strategic hamlets". But based on the evidence accumulated over the past 12 months, it is evident that the Indonesian authorities were unable to provide the basic food and medical needs of these hamlets which soon became centres of disease and death. In one or two of the hamlets (which are now known as centres for displaced persons) some attempts were made to improve living conditions, and the few foreign visitors to East Timor appear to have been directed to these centres, hence the favourable comments by some of them on Indonesia's efforts to deal with the starving population of East Timor. Some foreign aid officials have also praised the local authorities for the arrangements they witnessed during their brief visits to the territory, but the visitors appear not to have witnessed the actual distribution of supplies in the areas most desperately in need.

There have been many reports on other aspects of the treatment of the Timorese population by Indonesian authorities.

These included, during the past six months or so, several accounts of executions of surrendered Fretilin soldiers, reportedly by firing squads. According to one report, a party of some 200 soldiers were said to have been executed in the Baucau area. Other sources claim that many of the Fretilin soldiers and other persons have just disappeared. According to a letter in July this year; "many widows of the recently disappeared walk around in a very disturbed state, as though as skeletons". There have been some six separate accounts of bizarre executions of captured Fretilin leaders, possibly including Alarico Fernandes, the former Fretilin Minister for Information and Internal Security, who surrendered to the Indonesians some 12 months ago. These sources claim that a number of captured Fretilin leaders were taken up in helicopters and then hurled to their deaths during flight. At least one of these reports comes from a member of 744 Battalion, a recently formed unit of Timorese troops, but officered by Indonesians. A letter from Timor five weeks ago reported the execution of the Lobato family, the father being a male nurse and the mother a former member of the Portuguese Red Cross. The children ranged between 12 and 18 years of age. There have been many reports that a large number of Timorese are incarcerated in prisons in various parts of East Timor, contradicting an official Indonesian denial that there are any prisoners at all. According to one source, there are in fact some 40 prisons throughout the territory. Father de Rego spent some time in a prison in Baucau, where he was interrogated, and which he said he shared with hundreds of East Timorese. There have also been several references to the use of a warehouse in Dili and an old walled cemetary for prisoners said to be of a political kind. Reports from Indonesia suggest that the authorities in East Timor have so far refused to allow the International Red Cross officials to examine this particular question.

In a sense, there is a suppressed refugee problem in East Timor. If the country had shared a common border with a third power Australia would have been drawn into a massive refugee problem on its own doorstep. Tens of thousands of Timorese would leave for Portugal, Australia or any other place

if they were able to do so. It is clear that the Indonesian authorities are determined to prevent the kind of exodus that would attract international attention, and would lead to an undermining of the credibility of Jakarta's version of the integration process, not to speak of other aspects of life under Indonesian rule. Thus, the family reunion program involving those Timorese with relatives in Australia is proceeding at a very slow pace. Only one or two full-blooded Timorese are among the 260 who have been permitted to leave the territory. The remainder are mostly Chinese or "mestico" (mixed) Chinese, many of whom appear to have bought their way out. Most of the ethnic Timorese whose relatives fled to Australia in August 1975, were UDT officials who have become increasingly frustrated and critical of Indonesia's performance in East Timor. The fact that they know a great deal about the true situation, and are in a position to reveal that "integration" was very far from an act of free choice seems to be the main obstacle to their release. It might well be that the Indonesian authorities will not allow these officials to rejoin their families while there is some risk of a revival of interest in the fate of this unfortunate territory. According to recent reports from Timor those who have sought permission, via the ICRC, to leave the territory have found themselves being discriminated against in terms of food rations and employment. Meanwhile, the hopes of the Timorese women in Australia, some of whom are living in difficult circumstances, that they will ever be reunited with their husbands, are beginning to fade.

The re-admission of the International Red Cross to East Timor is an encouraging development but the effectiveness of the present arrangement, which involves a joint operation with the Indonesian Red Cross will be limited by its modest size and by the fact that the ICR component is very small - there will only be three ICRC delegates among the 80 members of the team. The ICRC Mission will have at its disposal some 3,500 tonnes of food, plus clothing, blankets and some medical supplies, which are to be distributed among some 60,000 of the worst-affected Timorese during the course of six months. It seems that the Indonesian authorities are seeing to it that the Mission pays its way. For

example, $A3,383,000 (or almost half of the total budget of $A6,966,000 for the operation) is to be spent on the hiring of helicopters for transport purposes. To complicate matters further, the ICRC is reportedly already encountering difficulty in raising funds for its modest Timor budget from the traditional national sources, many of whom are faced with heavy demands for other humanitarian relief operations, particularly in Indochina. There is also some doubt about whether the Mission will be granted access to areas such as Ermera, where the humanitarian situation has been very grim, and reportedly continues to be serious. Another important question is whether the International Red Cross officials will be permitted to probe into the sensitive areas of family reunion, tracing and the question of political prisoners, traditional functions of the organisation. Whatever the dedication of the ICR officials and their Indonesian colleagues there is mounting evidence that the Timor tragedy is of far greater magnitude and seriousness that most observers have hitherto been prepared to concede, and therefore the situation would seem to call for a much greater effort than the present mission will be in a position to mount.

This paper represents an attempt to survey and analyse the present situation in East Timor and recent developments, from a humanitarian rather than a political viewpoint. Although it is based on a careful study of the many reports that have come to the writer's attention during the past 12 months, there are obvious difficulties in verifying the facts of the situation in East Timor. Nevertheless, there is an unmistakable pattern of continuity and corroboration in nearly all of the hundreds of accounts that have come out from East Timor in one form or another since the attack on Dili in December 1975. Based on this particular study, it is difficult not to conclude that the dimensions of the Timor tragedy are far more serious than even concerned observers of the situation have so far been prepared to concede. It is particularly disturbing that Indonesia's efforts at humanitarian relief seem to have proceeded in marked contrast to the intensity of her military operations. The world's conscience has been appropriately shocked by the ordeals of the

"Boat People", and by the reports of enormous loss of life and suffering in Kampuchea, yet scant attention has been given to the humanitarian consequences of Indonesia's forced integration of East Timor which seems to be assuming the proportions of genocide. The case of East Timor presents, in relative terms, the most serious case of abuse of human rights, not to mention the right of self-determination, ever to have been inflicted on a people, in the crude guise of integration.

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